

## A revolutionary exile's life story

By KAREN WALD  
Special to the Guardian

HAVANA—Assata Shakur has been living quietly in Havana for several years, studying and writing, following her 1979 liberation from a New Jersey prison and a period of time underground.

A leading figure in the Black liberation movement in the early 1970s and a target of the FBI's Cointelpro operation, Shakur (formerly Joanne Chesimard) was arrested in a May 1973 incident on the New Jersey Turnpike in which a state trooper was killed. She was convicted of murder and sentenced to life imprisonment.

While in prison, and particularly after she was freed in a dramatic jail-break, Shakur became a powerful symbol of the Black liberation movement and the government's attempt to destroy it. The FBI's determination to reapprehend her was matched by support for her in Black communities across the U.S., where posters saying, "Assata Shakur is welcome here," were a frequent sight.

Shakur lives here with her daughter, Kakuya, who was born in prison and was 10 years old before she was finally able to live with her mother. She has recently been besieged by members of the mainstream U.S. press, who learned of her whereabouts late last year when her book, "Assata: An Autobiography," was published (see review, page 17). Before we began the discussion that follows, she wanted to make it clear that this interview meant more to her than the others:

The first thing I'd like to say is that it's a pleasure to be interviewed for the Guardian.



GUARDIAN PHOTO BY KAREN WALD

Assata Shakur in Havana.

During the years in prison and in exile I relied on the Guardian to get an idea about what's really going on in the country and in the world.

**How did you become a political activist?**  
I was born in 1947 in New York. I spent the  
(Continued on page 17)



## BOOKS

# 'Assata': The story of a Black survivor

**"ASSATA: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY"**

By Assata Shakur,  
Lawrence Hill, 1987,  
274 pages, \$9.95.

By ROSEMARI MEALY

**T**his autobiography is a celebration of life, a chronicle of the personal and political development of a survivor. Assata Shakur's account of her life is also a powerful affirmation of the right to be a Black revolutionary in the U.S.

Her book continues a Black literary tradition that began with the publication of "Narratives of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself." Like Douglass, Assata is a "fugitive" whose life story dramatizes the plight of her people.

"Better to die free than to die as a slave," Douglass wrote, as he called on Blacks to volunteer and fight in the Union army to liberate the slaves. More than 120 years later, Assata reminds us that Douglass's dream of liberation has not been realized.

## EXPERIENCE SOLIDIFIES VIEWS

The experiences that transformed her into a fighter mirror those of millions of other sisters, and she speaks for all of us: the 40% who are heads of households, maintaining some form of family in the face of tremendous racial and economic oppression; those who languish in prison; those who shoulder the dual burden of racial and gender discrimination at the workplace and in the unemployment lines.

The horrifying events surrounding her arrest on the New Jersey Turnpike on May 2, 1973 provide our first encounter with this remarkable woman. She describes being savagely dragged through ditches and along the highway by state troopers. Three bullets from the

gun of one of these troopers left her almost dead; one is still lodged in her chest today.

Next, we are suddenly catapulted back into her childhood. Shakur presents her family in an engaging manner. She weaves the Southern spaces into Northern incursions, where Black people's lives are defined and haunted by myths, legends and history. Regardless of class, racism is clear cut and pervasive.

Taking flight as a teenager from the security of a home with some of the trappings of Black petty bourgeois life, Assata thrust herself into the adult world in a search for self. In an unusual twist, it was the positive side of street life that saved her from the fate of millions of Black youths, especially girls. She returned to her family.

## FROM FRIED HAIR TO AFRO

Next, we learn how the Black reality of the late 1960s and early 1970s led her to become, successively, an intellectual, a radical and a committed revolutionary.

At that time, Manhattan Community College in New York was a campus of radicalism. Black and third world students assiduously took on an insensitive administration, demanding educational and cultural programs that reflected their needs. This was the setting for Assata's baptism into the real struggle of the Black community, and where her Black spirit became unlocked.

She went from fried hair to an Afro, and attended lectures that fueled her awareness. The world of Black history suddenly jetted beyond George Washington Carver's peanut experiments to include new heroes like Gabriel Prosser, Nat Turner, Cinque and others. The poetry of Sonia Sánchez stretched her mind, while Amiri Baraka and the Last Poets rapped, bending and emancipating her consciousness.

Joining other Black students from the cam-



pus, she went to rallies and community meetings. Ideologically, she came to view herself as a socialist, but did not join a number of such organizations because of the patronizing and condescending attitudes of some whites in them.

Assata the revolutionary was born when Martin Luther King was murdered. In a spewing soliloquy, she paints a surrealist painting of how she felt as she rode the subway that day.

It was not until sometime later that she actually joined an organization. She was impressed with the Black Panther Party (BPP) and became a dedicated member. At the same time, she was critical of its dogmatic and shortsighted practices and lack of a systematic approach to political education. She writes candidly of her experiences in the party, including her confrontations with several male leaders whom she accused of counter-revolutionary behavior.

Assata is the only former BPP member who has dared to write about some of the internal contradictions that contributed—along with FBI and police informants—to the party's demise. For many years many of us, especially sisters, have remained silent about the insidious male chauvinism of many Panther men.

She eventually left the BPP, but maintained contact with many members from New York and other chapters around the country. She was constantly shadowed by the FBI, as part of the Cointelpro campaign to destroy the Black liberation movement. Eventually driven underground, Assata Shakur awoke in 1971 to newspaper headlines accusing her of being a bank robber (a charge later dropped). She was placed on the FBI's most-wanted list and subsequently charged with kidnapping and murder.

## REVOLUTIONARY EXILE

Accused of killing a state trooper on that eerie night in May 1973, she was sentenced to life in prison. Her attorney, Lenox Hines, points out that the conviction was based on the "uncorroborated, contradictory and generally incredible testimony" of the sole witness, State Trooper James Harper. On Nov. 2, 1979, in a dramatic raid on the Clinton Maximum Security Prison in New Jersey, Assata was liberated.

Assata Shakur's autobiography was written from exile in Havana, Cuba, where she has found security and protection from extradition to the U.S. From this refuge, she decries the mental slavery that entraps Blacks in the false sense of being free, and warns that war is inevitable in the U.S. unless racism is dealt with. "As fast as this country is moving to the fascist far right, Black revolutionary organizations should start preparing for the inevitability," she contends.

Of her ordeal, Assata writes, "There was never a time, no matter what horrible thing I was undergoing, when I felt completely alone. Maybe it's ironic, I don't know, but the one thing I do know is that the Black liberation movement has done more for me than I will ever be able to do for it."

This is an important book—especially for youth. What she has to say is right up there with "The Autobiography of Malcolm X." ■

# 'Cointelpro is not dead and buried'

(Continued from page 1)

first years of my childhood in the segregated south, in Wilmington, N.C. I then returned to New York where I went to school, dropped out and went to work, and then later went back to college and there became active in the Black liberation struggle.

Manhattan Community College (MCC) was really a center of political activity. In addition to becoming politicized through participating in different struggles; being at MCC also exposed me to a lot of revolutionary political ideology and literature. It was there that I really began to discover Black history, literature and art. It was as if a whole new world had opened up to me. Participating in the antiwar movement and various local struggles against racism and for community control gave me the chance to combine the theory I was learning with practice.

## Why did you become a member of the Black Panther Party (BPP)?

Because I thought it was the right thing to do at the time. Even though I had some problems with the party's style of work, there were many positive things about the BPP that attracted me: the party's militant, anti-imperialist stance, and the fact that the BPP was a revolutionary Black organization dedicated to making socialist, revolutionary changes. The fact that the party was under attack made me feel that my participation was that much more important.

Anybody truly dedicated to liberating poor and Black people in this country is going to immediately come under attack. I think we understood that reality back then, but we were still kind of innocent, we didn't really understand the lengths that the government would go to maintain power. The Black liberation movement represented a threat to the power structure and therefore the government moved to squash it.

Even though we knew that something was seriously wrong in those days, none of us could quite put our fingers on the problem. Even though, for example, we knew that the BPP was infiltrated, nobody could have known that the FBI was going to wage a full-scale war against the BPP which would include phony letter campaigns to divide and subvert the party, imprisoning party members on false charges and the outright murder of

party members. Nobody could have known that the FBI had a carefully orchestrated program to prevent the rise of the "Black Messiah," to discredit militant Black leaders and organizations, and to discourage any kind of unity in the Black community.

## You're referring to the FBI's counterintelligence program (Cointelpro) that targeted the BPP in the late 1960s?

That's right. But I don't want to give the impression that Cointelpro is dead and buried. Under the Reagan administration the U.S. government is even more hostile to the Black liberation movement than Nixon was in the 1960s. The government's capacity for repression is much greater than it was then. If you look at the Oliver North scenario, the whole question of a government within a government and a CIA within the CIA with contingency plans to lock up 21 million people "in case of civil disturbances," then the picture is truly frightening.

The question of political prisoners in the U.S. is still a very important issue. The government, desperate to squash any kind of resistance, is moving against political activists who have worked in the Black community for years. The case of Mutulu Shakur and Marilyn Buck [currently on trial in New York City] is a perfect example of the government's continued persecution of Black activists and their supporters.

## What are some of the lessons you learned in the courtrooms and in prison?

One of the key words has got to be preparation. The level of activity was so intense in the late 1960s and early 1970s that we didn't have time to analyze or internalize many things that were confronting us. In a lot of cases we lacked the political maturity that would have enabled us to have dealt more effectively with the repression we were subjected to. The situation of oppressed people in the U.S. is one of the most difficult situations in the world, and more than anywhere else, we have got to be organized and ideologically prepared to struggle intelligently.

During the 1970s much of the focus of the movement was on political prisoners, yet a lot of times we failed to connect what was happening to political prisoners in the U.S. with what was happening, say, to political prison-

ers in South Africa, or Chile or El Salvador. Way back in 1964 or '65 Malcolm X had seen that Black people have to put our struggle in an international context, but in the 1970s many of us still didn't see U.S. imperialism as an international form of oppression that could only be defeated by an international strategy.

## What is your opinion of the Black movement in the U.S. today?

Even though there's not a lot of activity, I think that the level of consciousness in the movement today is much higher than it was 10 or 20 years ago. Black people, in general, are more politically sophisticated. People are seeing the connections between Howard Beach and Soweto, between the Reagan administration's policy in Angola and Alabama. The fact that so many Black people voted for Jesse Jackson in the 1984 primaries, even though they knew he didn't have a prayer of winning, is an indication that Black people are sick and tired of the lesser-of-two evils, Democratic-Republican party politics. But we've still got a long way to go.

One of the most important tasks we face as a movement is the job of educating our young people. Young people spend an average of seven or eight hours a day in front of the TV getting brainwashed. In school, they are being warehoused instead of educated. More than 50% or 60% are dropping out of high school, so it is our job to find effective, creative ways of educating and politicizing our youth so that they can understand and change their reality.

We need an intensive program of political education. If our struggle is to go to a higher level, to have the capacity to act in other than a spontaneous way, then a lot of us are going to have to train ourselves into disciplined, professional revolutionaries, who have a full command of modern revolutionary political science, and who have the organizing skills to put that theory into practice.

I believe that Black people have to be prepared on all levels to exercise our right to self-determination. I believe that oppressed people not only have the right to liberate themselves, but that they also have the right to decide the form that their liberation will take. In a country as blatantly racist as the U.S. with its history of expansion and chauvinism, a careful and thorough examination of the national question is imperative.

There are a whole variety of ways which the national question can be solved in the U.S. and all of those ways will depend on historical developments and objective conditions, and I don't think that we in the Black liberation struggle can afford to limit ourselves, or permit anyone else to do so. As far as I'm concerned, unity and solidarity have got to be based on respect, and I don't see how anyone can deny 30 million people who are undergoing one of the most brutal forms of racial and national oppression on earth, their right to self-determination, and at the same time claim to respect them.

## You're now living in Cuba as a political refugee. What made you choose Cuba?

I had read a lot about the Cuban revolution and I had a tremendous amount of respect for Fidel Castro, not just as Cuba's leader but as a world leader. Since I had to leave the States, I wanted to go somewhere I could be with my daughter Kakuya and also somewhere I could grow. I had read so much about socialism but I really wanted to experience it for myself.

Cuba went far beyond my most optimistic expectations. Of course it was different than anything I had expected, but I found the place truly beautiful. What's beautiful about Cuba is how the people live. They're not millionaires and they don't have a lot of electronic gadgets, but they're at peace.

This is the first chance I've had to live in a society that isn't at war with itself. You can actually walk down the street and not have to watch your back. Everybody's not walking around with a big cloud over their heads worrying about what's gonna happen if they lose their jobs, or they get sick, or how they're gonna put their kids through school. People actually feel secure, and aren't afraid to get old.

Living here was actually much easier than I thought it would be, because most Cubans are very careful about separating the U.S. government's policies from the people who live in the U.S. Nonetheless, one of the most painful things for me was to be called an American—since I've never been one. I have an urge to shout out to everyone, "I'm not down with that Yankee stuff; I'm emphatically against it! I'm against U.S. aggression in Nicaragua, in El Salvador, in Southern Africa, in Libya, in Grenada or wherever! I'm not a perpetrator of U.S. imperialism, I'm a victim of it." I really feel that it's important for me to say that. I think it's important for a lot of us to say it. ■